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LA FRANCE A VOTRE TABLE

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L'ARMAGNAC



Armagnac is brandy from Gascony, the land of the Three Musketeers of whom the Chevalier d'Artagnan is the most famous.

It is a picturesque area situated in the southwest of France where vineyards inhale whiffs of sea air from the Atlantic filtered by the Landes forest pine trees. Icy winds sweep down from the Pyrenees in winter, and summers are warm and sunny.

Armagnac is in keeping with this climate: it reflects both the determined temperament and subtlety of the people who make it. It is a powerful brandy with a characteristic flavour, rich in nuances.

A BIT OF HISTORY

The oldest records found indicate that an Armagnac

market existed in Mont-de-Marsan and Aire-sur-l'Adour as early as the 16th century.

In the 17th century, the Dutch bought nearly all the wines on the French Atlantic coast except the Bordeaux which were bought by the British.

They then moved up the Garonne river valley and negotiated their first contract with vine-growers in the Gers region. Fearing competition, Bordeaux wine merchants intercepted fleets sailing down the river, claiming that no wine other than Bordeaux could be transported by river.

Although wine was forbidden, alcohol was not, so they began to distil wines in the Gers region.

The Dutch then bought large quantities of alcohol in the Armagnac area and used it to enrich and stabilize wines which they supplied to the countries of Northern Europe.

Armagnac



THE ARMAGNAC OF TODAY

Today's Armagnac is the product of slow, continuous distillation of white wines made in a strictly limited area of which the main grape varieties are: « Saint-Emilion », « Colombard » and « Folle Blanche ».

Although climate, soil and grapes are considered essential factors in Armagnac the quality, vinification, distillation and ageing techniques are just as important.

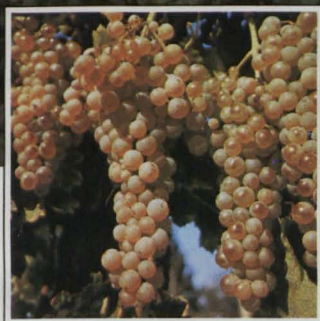
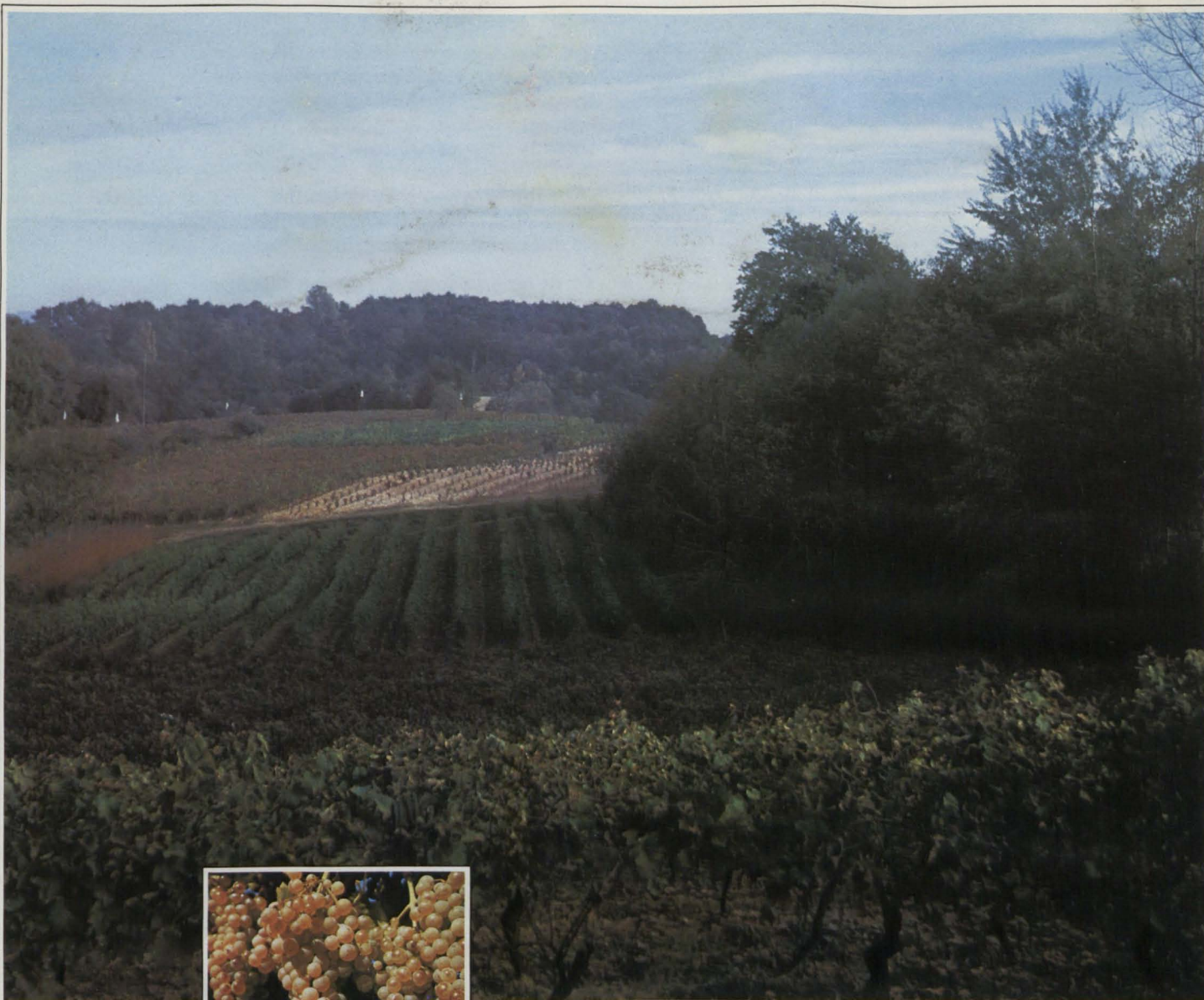
In the same way as Cognac was able to create a market and establish a name for itself, Armagnac followed the example. In 1909 the Armagnac producing area was defined by law, with a more accurate definition in 1936, completed in 1972.

VINEYARDS

The Armagnac region comprises three production areas boundaries, through an amazing quirk of fate, form a huge vine leaf pointed south.

The production area entitled to the « appellation d'origine » status covers a good part of the Gers « département », several cantons in the Lot-et-Garonne and in the Landes « départements ».

- The three production areas are :
- Bas-Armagnac,
 - Ténarèze,
 - Haut-Armagnac.



Bas-Armagnac

This region is also called Black Armagnac because of its forests. Its vineyards cover 11,861 hectares and grow in predominantly sandy soil (fawn-coloured sands). Prune flavour and prune aroma are the dominant characteristics of these renowned, delicate brandies. Eauze is the main centre of the Armagnac market.

Ténarèze

8,340 hectares of vines grown in clayey chalky soil. Warm and caressing, the brandies have a prune flavour and, sometimes, are perfumed with violets. Condom, the capital of this region, possesses a remarkable Armagnac museum.

Haut-Armagnac

This region is also called White Armagnac because of its calcareous soil. 600 hectares of vines yield very good brandies and choice table wines. Its centre is the town of Auch.

PRODUCTION

A total of 20,801 hectares of vines produce 1,500,000 hectolitres of wine on the average each year, with 8.5° Gay Lussac of alcohol. About half this harvest is distilled, yielding 58,000 hectolitres of pure alcohol representing a potential of 20,000,000 bottles of Armagnac of 70 centilitres with a 40° Gay Lussac alcohol content.

MAKING ARMAGNAC

It has remained a craft, performed in three phases :

- vinification,
- distillation,
- ageing.

VINIFICATION

Only white wines produced from specified grape varieties may be used for making Armagnac and they must be obtained through traditional wine-making methods without racking-off so that the wines still contain their lees. No œnological product must be added.



DISTILLATION

Distillation is carried out in winter and must be completed before April 30th the year following the harvest.

After the vintner, it is the distiller's turn. Likened to an alchemist for a long time he still remains a magician. He runs his still without taking his eyes off it, watching the most minute variations in the wine and wood fuel supply.

In the past, scores of stills rambled through the countryside, distilling wine on the harvest site; it was then a real festive occasion. Nowadays there are just fifteen or so which travel from farm to farm.

Thanks to improved techniques, it is usually the wine which goes to the still now, either at a distiller's works or a co-operative.

A characteristic feature of the Armagnac still is that it is of the continuous production type; this means that distillation is carried out in a single step.

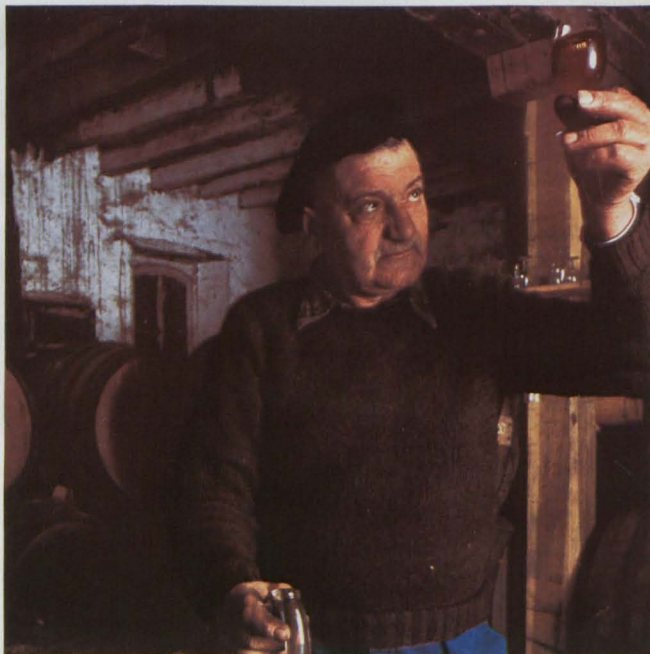
The Armagnac still is made of pure rolled, hammered copper. It is an apparatus equipped with two or three superimposed heaters in continuous and single distilling operation.

Wine flows from vat to still. Before being distilled, it serves as a cooler and allows alcohol vapours to condense. The resulting brandy distillate has a temperature as close as possible to 15° C. The wine and brandy flow in opposite directions. The wine heats up and alcohol vapours are formed and condensed as Armagnac when they come into contact with the cold wine. The wine circulates continuously and the brandy is drawn off all at once, in continuous operation.

At no time must the still be exposed to abrupt temperature variations.

As it is received from the still, the brandy — called « eau-de-feu » (literally : firewater) — is colourless; although its aroma is delicate, it may reach 72° Gay Lussac. It is diluted by successive reductions in the course of ageing in order to bring it to the legal minimum set for the sale of spirits, which is 40° Gay Lussac. The brandy then has a rather raw flavour which will disappear when, after one or two years in wood casks, it will be considered as « rassis » (ready for consumption).

Armagnac brandy acquires its golden hue and lingering aroma only after several years spent in oak casks.



AGEING

As soon as it comes out of the still, Armagnac brandy is stored for ageing in oak casks with a capacity of 400 litres; these units are hand-made from trees from the Monlezun forest, for no machine to date has succeeded in producing work of comparable quality.

It is only then that brandies are taken over by the master of the wine-cellar who keeps careful watch over their ageing, making sure that nothing disturbs their slow maturing process.

These casks are stacked and stored in wine cellars at about 12° C.

As it comes into contact with the wood, the brandy becomes impregnated with the fragrances of the forest and the native soil, and acquires a musky aroma and a beautiful amber colour.

Evaporation called—as with Cognac—the « angels' share », is in the order of 3 % for the overall stock.

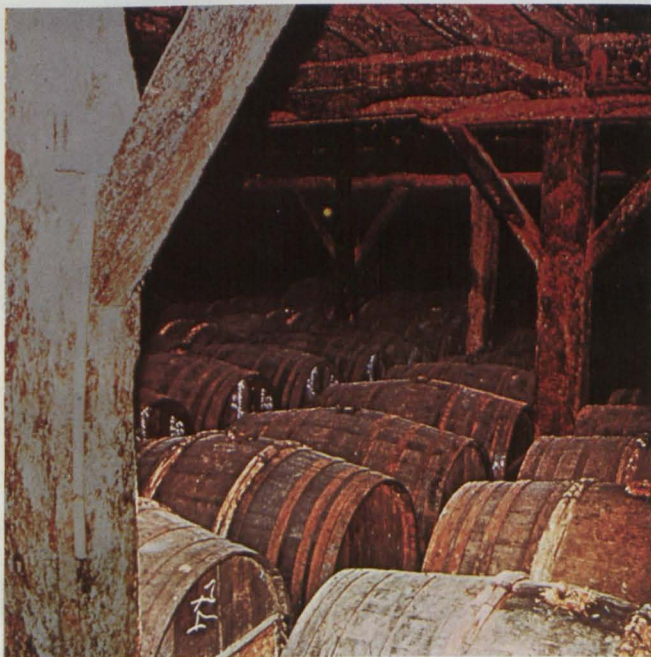
The walls of the cellars are covered with grey mould : the *Torula* fungus which feeds on alcohol vapours.

Supervision is constant and checks frequent so as to determine the moment when the dissolving of tannic matter and wood essences reaches its optimum rate.

The brandy is then transferred either to « worked-out » casks (i.e., no longer exuding tannin) or to vats.

The desirable degree of alcohol for consumption is obtained by adding « petites eaux », that is a mixture of distilled water and Armagnac, (at successive two-month stages).

The master of the wine-cellar may then begin blending or mixing, which—based on several brandies with different origins and ages—gives an even, constant product which guarantees the brand's renown.



The blend is a wedding of two or more brandies which—after mixing—achieves a fuller expression of the respective qualities and characteristics of each of them than would have been possible singly.

The blend's age is that of the youngest brandy and does not change. Even if a 30-year-old brandy is added to a 4-year-old brandy, the age of the brandy blend will always be 4 years. This represents additional protection for the consumer.

It is the blends which give the firm its reputation.

Each master of the wine-cellar has his own secret, his « trick of the trade ». He selects his brandies and his art lies in preserving and maintaining his « pied de cuve » (basic blending brandy) which serves as a foundation, so that the quality of the Armagnac always remains the same.

When the legal degree of alcohol for sale (40° Gay Lussac) is reached, the brandy is bottled. It no longer ages, but is stabilized and matures discreetly.



STORING

Bottles of Armagnac are then stored in an upright position so that the alcohol does not attack the cork; they are kept in cellars at an ideal temperature of 12° C.

PRESENTATION

You will find various sizes of bottles of Armagnac :

- « miniature », from 3 to 5 centilitres,
- « flask », from 16 to 18 centilitres (rarely used),
- bottle, 0.70 litres (most frequently used),
- « magnum », which may contain the equivalent of 2 bottles,
- jug or pitcher, 2.50 litres.



LABEL LANGUAGE

Some Armagnac products are labelled « Bas-Armagnac », « Ténarèze », or « Haut-Armagnac » when they come exclusively from one of the three sub-regions.

The single label « Armagnac » designates all brandies from within the certified area. It may also refer to the product of a mixture of sub-appellations, as it may come from a given sub-region without its being deemed necessary to claim the corresponding sub-appellation.

- All labelling referring to up to three items (such as : stars, crowns, lettres, etc.) may only be used for brandies at least one year old and at least three years old in the UK and preserved in wood casks; the same is true for « Monopole », « Sélection de Luxe » and like labels.

- « V.O. », « V.S.O.P. » (initials for « Very Old » and « Very Superior Old Pale »), « Réserve » and like labels apply to brandies which have matured at least 4 years in wood casks.

- « Extra », « Napoléon », « X.O. », « Vieille Réserve » and like labels may be applied only to brandies having spent at least 5 years in wood casks.

- The mention of a year indicates that the brandy is coming from one given year only without blending with brandies from other years.

HOW TO TASTE ARMAGNAC

« One sniffs Armagnac, one sips it, breathes it in ».

Serve it in brandy-glasses with lips curving gently inward so as to concentrate the fragrance of this full-bodied brandy.

The walls of the glass should be thin so that heat may be transmitted from the hands to the liquid. Glasses should be colourless so that the beautiful amber colour of Armagnac will not be distorted.

Rotate the glass slowly so that maximum evaporation will occur in the liquid, breathe in all its scents and taste the brandy with little sips, turning it about in your mouth so that the taste buds will be thoroughly steeped in it.

The whole « nose » of the Armagnac will suffuse you, leaving an after taste of prunes, vanilla, crushed white pepper...

When the glass is empty, warm it between the palms of your hands and take a last sniff of the fragrance which it exudes.

This is the famous « bottom of the glass », so characteristic of Armagnac.

VARIOUS USES OF ARMAGNAC

Armagnac is usually served after the midday or evening meal, straight, in its natural state. You may also offer it to your customers, however, after morning coffee, or for cocktails or in the afternoon when wrapping up a business deal.

In warm weather, many fruit juices—especially chilled lemon juice—are deliciously enhanced with a shot of Armagnac.

In winter, an Armagnac toddy will be a pleasant surprise for your customers.

You may also use Armagnac in your culinary preparations, but you should then choose a young brandy. Before serving, add a dash of old Armagnac; its aroma and its finesse will scent and embellish your dishes.

Armagnac is one of France's gastronomic treasures. This amber-coloured brandy, lovingly prepared by many generations of vine-growers, contains all the scents and fragrances of the Gascony soil from which it stems.

ARMAGNAC IN COCKTAILS



Armagnac "side-car"

1/3 Armagnac,
1/3 Triple Sec,
1/3 lemon juice.

Mix and add several ice cubes.



Armagnac "75"

1/4 Armagnac,
1/4 lemon juice,
1/2 Champagne or sparkling wine.
Serve cool.



Armagnac "sour"

1/4 Armagnac,
1/2 lemon juice.

Two dashes of sugar syrup, fill with soda, add ice cubes.

ARMAGNAC IN COOKING



Chicken "sauté à l'Armagnac" (for 4 people)

Preparation : 15 minutes.

Cooking time : 35 minutes.

Ingredients : 1 wine-glass of Armagnac, 1 chicken ready-to-cook, 50 g butter, 2 shallots, 1 tin of Paris mushrooms, 1 small tin of truffles, 1 decilitre of double cream, juice of 1/2 lemon, salt, pepper.

Cut up the chicken and brown in hot butter in a heavy bottomed pan—but not too brown—with the finely chopped shallots and drained mushrooms; keep mushroom water.

Remove pieces of chicken, keep hot. Remove residue in bottom of pan using mushroom water, add Armagnac and double cream.

Thicken over slow fire, stirring with wooden spoon. Add lemon juice, salt and pepper.

Put pieces of chicken back in pan, add truffles chopped in slices, simmer for about 10 minutes and serve piping hot.

ARMAGNAC IN DESSERTS



Apple flan flamed with Armagnac (for 4 people)

Preparation : 30 minutes.

Cooking time : 35 minutes.

Ingredients : 1-1/2 liqueur glass of Armagnac, 750 g apples, 200 g castor sugar, 50 g butter, 1/2 teaspoon powdered cinnamon.

For pastry: 250 g flour, 125 g butter, 1 pinch salt, 1/3 glass of water.

Prepare the pastry and place in buttered mould. Cook in hot oven for 15 minutes, turn out into a flan dish.

Peel apples, cut in quarters and brown in thick-bottomed pan in hot butter, 100 g sugar, pinch of cinnamon, 2 tablespoons of water and 1 tablespoon of Armagnac.

Pour this preparation over the flan case, sprinkle with 50 g sugar and the rest of the cinnamon, keep hot.

Heat Armagnac and rest of sugar, flame and pour over flan, serve at once.

If you fail to find Armagnac at your local
supplier contact :

Bureau National Interprofessionnel de l'Armagnac
B.P. 3 - 32 800 EAUZE

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